The Mennonite Settlement of Dos Palos

The story of Mennonite settlement on the west coast during the early twentieth century was one of uncertainty and instability. Mennonite pioneers coming west from the central plains did not have the benefit of hindsight to help them choose the most favorable locations for their new homes, and as a result did not always make the best choices. A few communities quickly established themselves as favorable locations for settlements and drew significant numbers of Mennonites; others withered and died after a short time.

One of those settlements unable to stand the test of time was located in Dos Palos, a small community on the border of Fresno and Merced Counties in California. The first reports from Dos Palos appear in the Mennonite Brethren paper Zionsbote in 1928. On March 7 of that year J.J. Unruh reported that his family had recently moved to Dos Palos, where they bought 14 acres at $75.00 per acre. Unruh, whose membership was with the Rosedale Mennonite Brethren Church of Bakersfield at the time, indicated that there were "one and a half" Mennonite Brethren families living in the area. Lacking the numbers to begin a church of their own, the Mennonite Brethren either met with the new General Conference group that had recently opened a Sunday school in Dos Palos or, as in the case of the Unruhs, occasionally attended an English-speaking Methodist church.

Other Mennonite Brethren settlers gradually were drawn to Dos Palos, and by January of 1930 there were five families living there. Names mentioned in the Zionsbote include J.J. Unruh, J.B. and Ida Koop, G.E. Thiessen and Jakob Bergen. The group had by now become large enough to attract the attention of the Mennonite Brethren Pacific District Conference Home Missions Committee.

Hidden Treasure in Colorado (cont. from page 2)

Benjamin NIKKEL (1813) and Aganetha DRIEDGER (1824)
Benjamin NIKKEL (1813) and Catharina KLAASSEN (1842)
Heinrich KRAUSE (1818) and Katharina FRIESEN (1823)
Cornelius KLINGENBERG (1826) and Charlotte BOWITZ (1821)
David DUECK (1846) and Helana REMPPE (1849)
David NIKKEL (1850) and Helena BERG (1853)
David NIKKEL (1850) and Elisabeth JANZEN (1867)
Heinrich PETERS (1845) and Katharina WALL (1846)
Peter KROEKER (1852) and Anna KLASSEN (1854)
Peter BULLER and and FRANZEN and (1858)
Peter KLINCK (1853) and Catharina BERGEN (1844)
Cornelius NIKKEL (1848) and Catharina LEPPKE (1853)
Peter KLASSEN (1813) and Gertrude TOEWS (7)
Peter KLASSEN (1813) and Maria NEUFELD (1828)
Wilhelm JANZEN (7) and Maria NEUFELD (1828)
Peter KLINCK (1827) and Ida NIKKEL (1836)
Jakob SCHMIDT (1845) and Helena ISAC (1841)
Bernhard PAULS (1833) and Maria PETERS (1836)
Benjamin NIKKEL (1840) and Helena NEUFELD (1835)
Benjamin NIKKEL (1840) and August VogT (1848)
Peter NIKKEL (1856) and Ida BENZIEN (1861)
Peter NIKKEL (1856) and Katherine KLASSEN (1883)
Franz ARNDT (1832) and Katharina FAST (1841)
Cornelius KLINGENBERG (1850) and Renatha KLINGENBERG (1848)
Jakob KRAUSE (1849) and Agatha REIMER (1857)
Johann KRAUSE (1861) and Helena NIKKEL (1863)
Johann KLINGENBERG (1853) and Elisabeth SCHRAP (1853)
Abraham NEUFELD (1843) and Agatha FRIESEN (1829)
Abraham NEUFELD (1843) and Maria REDDING (1853)
August KLINGENBERG (1857) and Anna SCHOENHOFF (1858)
Wilhelm SCHWARTZ (1837) and Berta HOESLE (1840)
Friedrich MORITZ (1841) and Florentina GARBEWSKY (1842)
Diedrich REMPPE (1844) and Aganetha BERG (1850)
Heinrich OLLINGERGER (1824) and Margaretha LITTAU (1829)
Heinrich NIKKEL (1858) and Agatha KRAUSE (1866)
Wilhelm J. MARTENS (1847) and Aganetha NIKKEL (1862)
Johann NEUFELD (1841) and Eva BULLER (7)
Johann NEUFELD (1841) and Maria KROEKER (1854)
Franz KROEKER (1864) and Eliesabeth SCHMIDT (1862)
Cornelius FIEDLER (1865) and Maria KLINGENBERG (1863)
Benjamin H. NIKKEL (1862) and Catharina SCHOENHOFF (1869)
August NEUKIRCH (1845) and Maria HANDORF (1853)
Cornelius J. NIKKEL (1866) and Ida NIKKEL (1869)
David BAERGEN (1849) and Helena ALBRECHT (1856)
Jakob THIEN (1852) and Katharina MARTENS (1854)
Jakob FRIESEN (1843) and Sara PENNER (1846)
Conrad BURKHARD (1856) and Maria BENER (1856)
Ferdinand ENGEL (1848) and Dorota LUEDKY (1851)
Johann SEIBEL (1868) and Katarina WELK (1871)
Isaak BERG (1863) and Elisabeth WIENS (1870)
Martin FISCHER (1851) and Aganetha PENNER (1860)
Johann FUNK (1850) and Maria (7) (7)
Peter EPS (1865) and Anna WINTER (1868)
Peter FAST (1851) and Sara KLASSEN (1847)
Johann BOESE (1844) and Liese WARKENTIN (1845)
Johann BOESE (1844) and Elisabeth FAST (1860)
Cornelius FRIESEN (1868) and Ida PENNER (1869)
Abraham HINRICHS (1860) and Catharina PENNING (1857)
Cornelius BRAUN (1848) and Katarina WARKENTIN (1852)
Franz WALL (1855) and Eva BULLER (1852)
Cornelius HINRICHS (1853) and Helena HINRICHS (1858)
Peter CONRAD (1851) and Helena WIENS (1856)
Daniel BERTHOUD (1820) and Katarina LINScheid (1831)
Bernhard WARKENTIN (1860) and Maria SUDERMAN (1865)
Abraham BRAUN (1849) and Elisabeth BULLER (1847)
Heinrich DAHL (1863) and Katharina PAULS (1869)
Arne PENNER (1866) and Katharina PAULS (1869)
Franz BUIE (1863) and Aganetha SAWATSKY (1862)
Edward FADENRECHT (1851) and Charlotte KRIECH (1853)
Johann HINRICHS (1849) and Katarina FRIESEN (1853)
Peter NEUMAN (1830) and Margaretha FAST (1834)
David FRIESEN (1838) and Sara FRANZEN (1843)
Jakob BULLER (1858) and Agatha FRIESEN (1864)
Heinrich BERTHOUD (1848) and Alvin STARK (1849)
Wilhelm J. BERG (1868) and Catharina BERG (1870)
Christian HODEL (1838) and Bertha LEGIEN (1847)
Heinrich KROEKER (1862) and Helen TASMAN (1868)
David WIENS (1866) and Karina BAERG (1871)
Gerhard FRIESEN (1869) and Agatha TOEWS (1869)
Johann PILATUS (1865) and Maria HORNBAECHER (7)
Eduard SUDERMAN (1833) and Maria PAULS (1833)
Abraham KLAASSEN (1853) and Katharina WIEBE (1854)
Cornelius SUDERMAN (1868) and Anna KROEKER (1877)
Franz MEKELBURGER (1870) and Maria REIMER (1876)

—Alan Peters
Mennonite Settlement in Dos Palos  
(cont. from page 3)

which recommended in 1930 that Dos Palos receive visits recommended in 1930 that Dos Palos receive visits from local itinerant evangelists. The Mennonite Brethren families met frequently as a group for Bible study and prayer or to hear a sermon from a visiting Mennonite Brethren minister, but continued to meet on a more formal basis with the General Conference Mennonite congregation. This congregation, established in 1928 as a Sunday school, was formally organized in 1931 with Dan Gerig as minister. The 1932 Mennonite Year Book & Almanac listed Sunday school attendance as 100 and congregational membership as 24.

Among the Mennonite Brethren families in this congregation were some already well experienced in the search for suitable settlements. Two examples illustrate the mobility that characterized many western Mennonites during this period. J.J. Unruh migrated from Russia to Mountain Lake, Minnesota in 1876, where he married Maria Penner in 1886. In 1909 the Unruh family moved to Aberdeen, Idaho, where they lived for eleven years. The Unruhs then relocated to Bakersfield, California in 1920 and farmed in that area for several years. In the late 1920s they lived briefly in San Jose before settling in Dos Palos in 1928. After retirement, the Unruhs returned to Bakersfield and later entered the home for the elderly in Reedley. An even more dramatic example of this phenomenon is that of Jakob B. and Ida Koop. J.B. Koop’s wanderings began while he still lived in Russia, when he participated in the ill-fated trek to Asia led by millenialist Claas Epp in 1880. Upon migration to the United States, the Koops settled in Bu渴er, Kansas in 1893. Buhler would be their home for only a few years, and during the next three decades the Koops would live in Corn, Oklahoma (1897-1906); Michigan (1906-1908); Corn, Oklahoma (1908-1912); Collinsville, Oklahoma (1912-1914); Idaho (1914-1920); Shafter, California (1920-1923); Bakersfield, California (1923-1929) and Dos Palos, California (1929-ca. 1933). The Koops then moved to Shafter before finally settling in Bakersfield for the last years of their lives. Similar stories could be told of many other Mennonites of the early twentieth-century west.

The Mennonites of Dos Palos, many of whom saw that community as merely the most recent in a series of migratory stopping points, did not find a land of wealth and happiness there. These were years of economic depression, and were particularly hard for an isolated farming community such as Dos Palos. J.J. Unruh reported in early 1931 that neither property nor crops were worth much and that there was inadequate water in the canals. From the start, the economic viability of the Dos Palos Mennonite community seemed in question.

If economic conditions were poor, religious life was also less than ideal. The Mennonite Brethren settlers in Dos Palos frequently lamented their isolated condition and pleaded with the Pacific District Conference to send them more ministers. The Conference granted these requests and in 1931 assigned C.N. Hiebert to spend one week there, and further recommended that the Reedley and South Reedley congregations alternately send ministers to Dos Palos, perhaps once per month. Another means of overcoming their isolation was through quarterly festivals of the various Mennonite congregations in the region. Reports from two such festivals, in September of 1931 and September of 1932, are extant and indicate that they were attended by members from the Mennonite Brethren congregations in Lodi, Winton and Fairmead and the General Conference Mennonite Church of Dos Palos. These days of singing, prayer and preaching allowed the secluded Mennonite communities of the region to feel a part of a larger community and thereby raise spirits brought low by continual isolation.

By 1933 the Mennonite settlement in Dos Palos was obviously weakening. Adequate water for irrigation was still unavailable, rendering successful agriculture impossible. J.J. Unruh reported in March that they had lost all of their neighbors due to depression-related hardships. Land agents repossessed property from those unable to make payments. Where only a short time ago there had been 70 pupils in the General Conference Sunday school, now there were 20. By August of 1933, the General Conference had dissolved its congregation in Dos Palos. Some Mennonites still remained, however, among them the faithful Zionsbote reporter J.J. Unruh. He noted in October of 1933 that more families were moving away and that they too would like to live where there were more brothers and sisters in the faith. By mid-1934, Unruh reported that there was no longer a German church in Dos Palos and that German sermons were rarely heard there. The Mennonite Brethren Pacific District Conference no longer saw the need to send ministers to Dos Palos and C.C. Penner in 1934 was the last evangelist to that community mentioned in the conference yearbooks. Some of the remaining Mennonites found fellowship with the Fairmead congregation, but the distance between these communities was too great for regular fellowship. The last Zionsbote report from Dos Palos appeared in the January 2, 1935 issue, in which Unruh reported that there were only three Mennonite families left in the area, and they too were waiting for the opportunity to sell their property and move to areas where more church members lived. After that point there is only silence in the Mennonite Brethren press regarding the Dos Palos settlement, a victim of economic hardship and spiritual isolation.

—Kevin Enns-Rempel

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